Students test-drive iPads in technical writing course

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Technical writing student Matt Maissel, uses his iPad for class work. Credit: Michael Faris

Niko Kovacevic, a Penn State junior studying math and computer science, originally wasn't thrilled about fulfilling the technical writing requirement for his major. What he didn't know was that he would be getting an Apple iPad for the fall semester to use for his course work -- no strings attached. Throughout the semester he has enjoyed exploring the tablet as a new educational tool.

According to a report from eMarketer, tablet sales are expected to increase more than 400 percent by 2012, thanks in part to the iPad. They guesstimate that more than 81.3 million tablets will be sold in 2012, up

from the 15.7 million units sold worldwide in 2010. And a recent article in The New York Times states that the number of schools using iPads across the nation is increasing because of the device's large touch screen, flat design and feather weight, offering relief from heavy textbooks. New York City public schools have ordered more than 2,000 iPads, more than 200 Chicago public schools applied for 23 district-financed iPad grants, and six middle schools in four California cities are teaching the first iPad-only algebra course.

In summer 2010 Penn State's Education Technology Services (ETS) bought 40 iPad tablet computers for faculty and student projects. Michael Faris, an instructor in the Department of English, planned a technical writing course for fall 2010 featuring the iPad in its curriculum.

"Students in my class were juniors and seniors who had already developed their reading, writing and research habits," Faris said. "The iPad forced them to adapt to different strategies and change the way they think about their work."

Each student in the class received the touch-screen-only iPad and an accessory keyboard for the semester. Apple donated iTunes gift cards to cover the cost of applications students may have needed to download for the class -- like a word processing program -- as well as a gift card from publishing company Bedford/St. Martin's, to cover the expense of the digital textbook they needed to download.

Faris said that his students found the iPad's light weight convenient and told him it's a great tool for reading and doing simple writing tasks. However, they also reported having trouble writing more extensive papers and creating multimedia projects with it.

"I think right now it's best to view tablet devices as supplements: they

don't replace anything, but they fill needs and gaps in work activities," Faris said. "For instance, a tablet can't replace the writing and heavy research capabilities of a laptop, but it can provide for a second screen, supporting some research that might have been open in a browser or printed off or in a book."

Kovacevic agrees. He said the weight and portability of the iPad are nice benefits. He also likes having Internet access, class files, notes, a calendar of events and potentially all of his textbooks all on one device lighter than a laptop. However, when it comes to word processing -- for writing papers and other technical documents -- using an iPad is cumbersome.

"Auto-corrected typing, especially in conjunction with the onscreen keyboard, makes composition feel like writing papers on a cell phone," Kovacevic said. "Documents requiring complicated formatting, such as resumes and instruction sets, have proven to be especially difficult to create on the iPad because of over-simplified commands and reduced control of touch-pad versus keyboard and mouse. Luckily, these disadvantages are solved by simply composing on a full-version computer rather than the iPad."

A fan of the iPad's convenience, Kovacevic said he would be in favor of using it in more of his classes, but would probably not take another course based around it, preferring to type papers with a word processor instead. He also said that data transfer and hardware connectivity are weak on the iPad, which has no ports for connecting devices like storage drives and digital cameras. However, he wishes more classes used books available to download online and read on the iPad, so he could just have all textbooks stored in one lightweight location.

"I feel that the term and experiment was a success this fall. Besides minutiae in implementation and scheduling, I probably wouldn't suggest

changing too much in our program," Faris said. "One thing I think would be interesting is exploring more apps by students and teachers to really discover how the device could be used in a variety of ways. There are many tools out there, and students and teachers could probably find some free apps that might engage education or writing in new or interesting ways."

Stuart Selber, associate professor of English and Science, Technology and Society, worked with ETS to help establish Faris' iPad-centered class. Selber says that because today's students do a considerable amount of writing using nontraditional means, such as cell phone texts, instant messaging and e-mails, he believes the iPad and similar tablets may be the future of reading, writing and the majority of communication. He also believes not all writing that students do in higher education has to be in the standard format. Tablet computers may or may not have an impact on reading, writing and research skills, he said, and he's open to the idea that they may come to serve the status quo, or change the future of education. One thing he is sure about is that, in productive ways, technology is challenging students and teachers in higher education.

Using iPads in the English course and researching how students adapt to the changes are concepts that interest Selber and Faris.

Because computers are getting smaller and cheaper, Selber isn't sure that the iPad and similar computers won't be the future of education. Still, the iPad has some flaws he would like to see ironed out. The iPad isn't plugged into the institutional grid -- students need a credit card for an iTunes account, they don't plug into Penn State computer labs and certain online content that students need to access, such as the ANGEL course management site, isn't compatible with the iPad. However, Selber thinks the smaller tablet computers might get more student-friendly in the future. Besides their convenience and portability, there are more than 200,000 applications that iPad users can download that are free or fairly

inexpensive. These applications make the iPad more applicable to a student's daily needs. And, so far, teachers in Selber's department are interested in implementing iPads into the curriculum.

"For us, a writing class is not about going to class to hear someone talk about writing, but instead allowing the students to work on their actual writing," Selber said, referencing limits to available classrooms furnished with multiple computers. "The convenience of iPads would entice students to bring them to class so there's one computer per student."

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